

# **HOW TO RESPOND TO KSA STATEMENTS**

# WHAT ARE “KSAs”?

“KSA” is an acronym that stands for Knowledge, Skills and Abilities (also called “ranking statements”, “evaluation criteria” and narrative statements”) required by government and public sector organizations in addition to a resume or application when applying for a job vacancy. KSAs are qualities needed by applicants to successfully perform their job and are used in the Merit Promotion process to distinguish the “*highly qualified candidates*” from among the “*qualified*” candidates. KSAs are defined as:

KNOWLEDGE: An organized body of information, usually factual or procedural in nature. For example, “knowledge of the concepts and principles of accounting” could be used as a KSA for an Accountant position.

When responding, applicants should indicate what accounting principles they are familiar with, discuss how they applied these principles in the work environment, and describe other significant situations they were involved in.

SKILL: The proficient manual, verbal, or mental manipulation of data or things. For example, “Skill in Operating Personal Computers” could be used as a KSA for a Computer Assistant position.

When responding, applicants should indicate what type of personal computers they have operated, discuss the various types of software programs they have used, and describe how these programs were applied in their work environment.

ABILITY: The power or capacity to perform an activity or task. For example, “Ability to Identify Signs of Discord, Tension, or Abnormal behavior” could be used as a KSA for Correctional Counselor position.

When responding, applicants should discuss the various signs of suspicious behavior they have encountered, how they responded, and indicate what impact it had on the work environment.

# WHY ARE KSAs IMPORTANT?

KSAs can be **EXTREMELY IMPORTANT** in the applicant evaluation process since they are scored. Poor responses may prevent you, as an applicant, from being considered among the “best qualified” group. Remember, your score for experience is based solely on your responses to the KSAs, not the information included in your resume, OF-612 (Optional Application for Federal Employment) or SF-171.

The federal resume or application is the information that tells the decision-maker **if you are qualified for the job** and KSAs describe your skills using concrete examples so that the hiring manager can determine **if you can perform their job**. The application review is a three-step consideration process.

**The Human Resources Review Process for determining your qualifications and for rating and ranking your KSAs goes as follows:**

Your total application will be sent to the federal agency. This will include your federal-style resume or OF-612 and KSAs for a specific announcement. The announcement might ask for other information as well. You have to read the instructions to determine what they want, i.e., college transcripts, DD-215, your last supervisory evaluation, etc.

➤ **Step 1**

**APPLICATION REVIEW:** A Personnel Staffing Specialist will review your package to make sure you have completed the application correctly by including all of the appropriate documentation requested (lots of people don't make it past this point). If the application is correct, they will review your resume to decide if you have the basic qualifications for the position.

➤ **Step 2**

**RESUME REVIEW:** The staffing specialist will then review your application to determine if you meet the minimum qualifications for the job. You can find this qualification information on every vacancy announcement. If you are qualified for the position, they will usually decide if you are QUALIFIED or HIGHLY-QUALIFIED. If you are either of these, then the KSAs are reviewed.

➤ **Step 3**

**KSA RATING AND RANKING:** Each KSA will be reviewed by the Human Resources Staff and assigned a numerical score using a crediting plan or “scorecard”. The scale is generally based on a point system. Ex: 5 points for barely successful, 15 points for successful and 20 points for highly successful. Each level has a description of benchmarks, which are examples of tasks a candidate would perform at that level. You will not be able to find

out how many points are assigned to each KSA. You just need to write them knowing they will be graded. Factors affecting level of credit your KSA is given include: **complexity** of duties, **circumstances**, **impact**, **variety**, **duration** and **people contacted**. Panel members take into account experience, education, training and awards as they relate to the factors. Once the total score (responses to KSAs, performance appraisal and training) is determined, you will be ranked among other applicants. If your KSAs are scored in the range of the highest scores, you will have your name included on the Best Qualified List. This group of Best Qualified candidates will go forward to the Selecting Official or hiring manager for consideration, who ultimately makes the selection for the vacancy.

Understanding the personnel review process and the importance of good KSAs is critical to your success in being hired by the Federal government.

## **PREPARING RESPONSES TO KSAs**

Prior to responding to KSAs, gather and review information on past and present experience. Remember, you do not have to restrict your responses to your present position, but can discuss related past experiences.

Check the following sources that are available to you when preparing to respond to KSAs:

- ◆ Read the vacancy announcement thoroughly. Review the experience requirements in the announcement to determine if you have related experience.
- ◆ Update your current resume or Optional Application for Federal Employment (OF-612) so that it does not conflict with your KSA responses.
- ◆ Gather documents which will give you information that could be included in your KSA responses (i.e., college transcripts, training records, awards, documents you have written, etc.)
- ◆ Review weekly or monthly status reports regarding work performed you may have written to provide information regarding past assignments, projects, or activities that need to be addressed in your KSA responses.
- ◆ Review previous performance or progress reviews.
- ◆ Scan your computer directories and disks to help you remember past work assignments.

- ♦ Interview someone currently in the position/discipline in which you're interested if possible. It may help you determine whether there is any correlation between your experience and the position for which you are applying, prior to addressing the KSAs.
- ♦ Maintain a personal notebook, table or journal. Record major accomplishments, projects or activities as they occur. When it is time to respond to KSAs, you will have information at your fingertips.

## DEVELOPING KSA RESPONSES

One of the most common errors made in addressing KSAs is to start switching randomly or haphazardly. Applicants may jot down thoughts with no organization and structure, and in some cases, no relationship to the KSA. What is written initially is put on paper and attached to the application package.

Prior to responding to each KSA, brainstorm and think about what type of tasks you performed and why you performed them in relationship to the KSA. Think about for whom you performed the tasks. Ask yourself whether you made any major accomplishments. When performing these tasks, did a significant impact on the work environment occur?

By asking these questions, you think critically and objectively about the tasks you performed. In addition, it will help remind you to think "only" about tasks directly related to the KSA.

There will be times when a particular task performed will apply to more than one KSA. In those situations, you may discuss the same task under different KSAs, but be sure to show the direct relationship of the task to the additional KSAs and to show a different phase of the activity.

To reinforce the idea of organizing your thoughts when responding to KSAs, ask yourself the *five standard questions* as a *checklist* regarding individual tasks performed:

- 1) **What** action was performed?
- 2) **Why** was the action performed?
- 3) **For whom** was the action performed?
- 4) What were the **accomplishments**?
- 5) Did the action produce a significant **impact** on others or the work environment?

When preparing KSA responses, you sometimes may write a long list of examples of tasks for each KSA. If the responses become too long, identify those tasks which are most critical, highest level or most impressive.

**KSAs can include:**

- Paid and unpaid experiences
- Education: degrees, courses and research projects
- Awards and recognitions
- Quotes from letters written by people who think you are great

How should you decide which examples of tasks to keep in comparison to those that can be discarded? Use the following type of tasks to represent your experience, when possible:

<b>LEADERSHIP</b>	Use tasks that demonstrate your leadership, organization, or management skills. For example, applicants should discuss their role on committees/taskforces; discuss how they planned activities and events; or discuss their responsibilities in managing groups of individuals in various settings (i.e., office, classroom, organization/club, correctional environment)
<b>FUNCTIONING IN A STRESSFUL ENVIRONMENT</b>	Use tasks that demonstrate your ability to effectively deal with stress related events/activities. For example, applicants could discuss their responsibility for transportation security issues or discuss how they dealt with critical deadlines.
<b>COMPLEXITY AND/OR CREATIVITY</b>	Use tasks that demonstrate complexity or creativity. For example, applicants could describe how they designed programs for personal computers, prepared papers on technical subjects, or used formulas to derive solutions.
<b>PERTINENCE TO THE POSITION</b>	Frequently, applicants apply for positions outside their own discipline. However, applicants who have experience directly related to the position and include this in their responses, will usually be awarded the higher points.
<b>MAJOR IMPACT OR SIGNIFICANT OUTCOME</b>	Use tasks where your actions had an impact on others or the work environment. For example, applicants could discuss procedures they developed for their office that streamlined operations; discuss how they negotiated a contract that resulted in a favorable outcome; or describe how their input on a project made a significant impact on the organization.

Applicants who respond to KSAs by showing a relationship to any of the above areas are more likely to receive more points for their responses. Place yourself in the panel member's shoes and think about what you would look for if making the selection.

## Other Tips on Responding to KSAs

- Express your **accomplishments in specific or measurable terms**. For example, "developed and wrote operating procedures for..... participated in five program reviews..... provided training once a month to groups of 10 to 15 employees on..... supervised approximately 10 employees in..."
- When describing work experience, **be specific about your role** in completing tasks. Sometimes it is difficult for reviewers to determine whether the applicant performed the task alone, assisted, or participated as part of the group, if not specifically stated.
- Show increases in production over a time period. For example, "developed operating procedures used by the division that reduced processing time by 50%..."
- Don't be modest in describing your accomplishments. Those reviewing your application can not assume any level of experience that is not documented. In addition, they will not assume you performed certain tasks based on your "job title."
- Be honest and consistent in your responses to your KSAs and on your resume or Optional Application for Federal Employment (OF-612). References are checked, so resist the temptation to exaggerate the truth.
- Use strong action verbs describing your experience. Reviewers are likely to be impressed with direct language rather than vague or flowery prose. Avoid repetitive language and cliches, such as "I'm a people person."
- Don't try to "snow" the Human Resources Staff and panel members by passing off a "*philosophy*" for knowledge or experience. When you lack certain experience, indicate **any** relevant training or academic course work. Use examples of volunteer work experience. Both volunteer and paid work experience are acceptable.
- Proof read! Proof read! Proof read! Get a coworker, supervisor, or other associate to help you proof your responses. Lack of attention to your grammar and spelling may diminish your written responses and leave a lasting impression on the rating panel.

- Don't borrow language from your position description when writing your responses. Remember, managers and supervisors help prepare position descriptions and are familiar with its content. Paraphrase and make the language in the response your own.
- Remember to include all training/education related to the KSAs in your responses--- including job-related cross development courses. Do not expect the Human Resources Staff or panel members to guess what training might be applicable to the KSA by referring to your training record. It is your responsibility and failure to do so may cost you valuable points.
- Type your responses. It looks more professional and is easier to read and understand.
- Each KSA statement should be approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 1 page in length and no longer than 1 and  $\frac{1}{2}$  pages. Remember, get to the point and avoid including insignificant information.
- Each KSA should have at least two or three examples which demonstrate your knowledge, skill or ability.
- For each KSA, use either bullets at the beginning of each response OR a paragraph format. If you use paragraphs, be sure to limit your paragraph size.
- Spell out all terms prior to using acronyms. Human Resources Staff and panel members may not always be familiar with abbreviated terms used in various disciplines.
- Do not refer reviewers to other parts of your application (i.e., SEE Page 1 of my Federal resume) as a response to your KSAs. Your written response is important, as the Federal application may not be used in the panel.
- KSAs can be written in first person such as: "I designed the new system which increased ..."
- Your KSAs will demonstrate your ability to perform this job and should be based on accomplishments or critical incidents that demonstrate your knowledge, skill or ability.
- KSAs are a written, informal "test." If the KSAs are well written, the hiring manager will enjoy reading your KSAs and they will go a long way to helping you win over other applicants.
- The average amount of time spent on each set of KSAs is 3 hours.



- KSA examples should be specific, not general. Use details like dollar amounts, man-hours, percentages, numbers and volume to describe your accomplishments. (See below on how to write accomplishments) How much time or money did your improvements save over the old way of doing things? What's the percentage of improvement? What's the volume (number) of applications, cases, contracts, etc. that you or your office handles per day, per week, per month? Is this an improvement? If so, how much?
- Use KSAs to paint a specific picture in the reader's mind of the size and scope of your accomplishment. For example, managing a computer network in a single office with one server and 10 clients (end-users) is very different than managing a network spread across several buildings or states with dozens of servers and hundreds of end-users.

Let's look at responses to the KSA *"Ability to communicate orally"* from an applicant who is applying for an Employee Development Manager position. This is his first attempt.

**Ability to communicate orally.**

*As an Employee Development Specialist, I interact with a variety of people, from staff to managers regarding training needs. I provide training to staff on a variety of topics. I set up training for staff. I meet with vendors. I have had many employees thank me for providing them with a better understanding of their training needs. My supervisor told me I was doing a great job and*

His first attempt provides limited detail regarding the tasks being performed. In addition, subjective information regarding how others feel about him is included.

Now, look at the applicant's new and improved version below.

**ELEMENT: ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE ORALLY.**

*As a Supervisory Employee Development Specialist, I interact with staff, managers and supervisors on a daily basis to convey information on training programs, provide guidance on training needs, and supervise employee development staff. Specifically, I perform the following tasks:*

- *Conduct numerous training classes, both formal and informal, to groups of 15 to 35 individuals on such topics as "Instructors Skills", "Planning for Your Future", "Career Growth", "Using Lotus-1-2-3", "Providing Guidance to Your Employees" and "Basic Functions of the PC".*
- *Meet with managers, supervisors and vendors to discuss training that is needed for specific groups, divisions or sections. For example, the agency's Administrative Division had an influx of new secretaries who lacked Lotus 1-2-3 experience, which was now needed for a major long-term project in the Division. After determining the Division's training needs and meeting with managers, I provided training to all secretaries. This training contributed to the Division meeting projected deadlines for work output.*
- *Brief upper management on specific budget needs and operating costs for employee training. In addition, I gave a formal presentation to upper management for an agency wide training program. Although the agency was facing cuts in other program areas, I was able to persuade management to approve this training.*
- *Supervise and provide guidance to 5 employees in the Employee Development Division. In addition, I meet with subordinates several times during the rating period to discuss employee concerns, goals, progress reviews, and the final performance rating. This past rating period, I developed an "Improvement Plan" that encompassed additional on-the-job training and formal training classes for employees who were weak in specific areas. I guided them in meeting established goals. Due to the positive turn-around in employee performance, this "Improvement Plan" has been deemed a success by upper management.*

*Completed the following training courses: 1) Effective Communication, 1/95; 2) Improving Supervisory Skills, 4/95; and 3) Negotiation with Others, 9/95.*

*Selected as "Supervisor for the Quarter" 4/95 to 6/95 by staff due to my concerns, interests, and efforts in helping subordinates to improve their performance.*

In the second KSA response, the applicant specifically discusses the type of people he interacts with, the purpose of those contacts, and what accomplishments have been achieved.

If you can remember to:

- Prepare;
- Ask the five standard questions
- Avoid including subjective remarks in your KSA statements as much as possible
- And keep in mind the additional tips given on writing responses to KSAs;

Attached are "Six Steps to Strong Accomplishment Statements" and some samples of accomplishment statements to help you with creating strong KSA's.

You should be able to improve you KSA responses and subsequently, your scores. Good luck!

## Six Steps To Strong Accomplishment Statements:

THE FOLLOWING STEPS WILL HELP YOU TO DEVELOP YOUR ACTION STATEMENTS THAT GIVE EVIDENCE OF YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS. SELECT SKILLS NECESSARY FOR THE POSITION YOU ARE APPLYING.

STEP 1 STATE THE PROBLEM, NEED OR CHALLENGE

**PROVIDE SECRETARIAL SUPPORT, WRITE LETTERS, MEMOS, AND REPORTS, AS NEEDED.**

STEP 2 IDENTIFY A SKILL

**WRITE LETTERS AND MEMORANDA**

STEP 3 CITE AN EXAMPLE OF HOW YOU USED THIS SKILL

**FOR THREE YEARS WROTE LETTERS AND MEMORANDA FOR THE OFFICE DIRECTOR'S SIGNATURE.**

STEP 4 DESCRIBE THE CIRCUMSTANCES—  
WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY, AND HOW.

**DAILY, INDEPENDENTLY RESEARCHED AND DRAFTED LETTERS IN RESPONSE TO CONGRESSIONAL INQUIRIES, REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION FROM COMPANIES AND THE PUBLIC, AND RED BORDERS FOR THE SEVENTH FLOOR PRINCIPALS.**

STEP 5 REINFORCE WITH MEASURABLE DATA—NUMBERS, DOLLARS, PERCENTAGES, VOLUME PER MONTH, YEAR, ETC.

**WROTE 20- 25 RESPONSES TO CONGRESSIONAL INQUIRIES PER WEEK DURING A 6-MONTH PERIOD; WROTE 25-30 RESPONSES TO PUBLIC INQUIRES PER MONTH; WROTE 3-6 RED BORDERS PER WEEK DURING CRISES, ENSURING THAT ALL WERE GRAMMATICALLY CORRECT AND IN COMPLIANCE WITH CORRESPONDENCE REGULATIONS.**

STEP 6 GIVE RESULTS. WHAT WAS ACCOMPLISHED BECAUSE OF YOUR USE OF THIS SKILL? PRODUCTIVITY, MORALE, CUSTOMER SERVICE, PROBLEM SOLVING, MONEY SAVED, ETC.

**HANDLED THE CORRESPONDENCE PREVIOUSLY DONE BY TWO SECRETARIES, AND REDUCED TURNAROUND TIME SIGNIFICANTLY. RECEIVED CASH AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCE.**

# **SAMPLE ACCOMPLISHMENT STATEMENTS**

- ❑ Designed a 5-month training program for career employees that was expanded and implemented nationwide as an in-service training program. Determined course requirements, coordinated arrangements, selected and contracted trainers, selected and purchased training materials. Three hundred employees have been trained annually. (Received Cash Award)
- ❑ Managed and coordinated, independently, the mailings, handouts and site logistics of three meetings during a 30-day period. Arranged for 50 people from five agencies and ten companies per meeting to be cleared in advance to enter Main State. Met all deadlines and resolved last minute details.
- ❑ Lead member of team responsible for implementing an automated accounting system for foreign exchange which provided immediate access of currency positions and improved accuracy by 100% to management and foreign exchange traders.
- ❑ Headed a project team responsible for the evaluation of procedures and policies, implemented and managed changes for better utilization of resources based on team findings.
- ❑ Achieved team and individual incentives for identifying fraudulent activity and preventing losses. Net loss avoidance averages over \$2 Million.
- ❑ Introduced word-processing to the letter of credit department which improved quality, speed and accuracy of documents by 100% and reduced operating costs by \$60,000.
- ❑ Instrumental in retaining 85% of customers through completion of MCI conversion project. Awarded a cash bonus award from executive management.
- ❑ Served as liaison between CoreStates and Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) which resulted in student loan accounts being updated in a timely matter.